A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years. Edited, with an Introduction, by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982. 190 pp. $12.95.

In Old Testament times, prophets were both more conservative and more radical than the culture to which they spoke. In calling men back to an older covenant relationship with God, they seemed at best eccentric, at worst subversive of the status quo. Within a largely secular context, the Nashville Agrarians of the 1930s were similarly hybrid figures. Reactionary rebels, they were—in the words of John Crowe Ransom—"reconstructed but unregenerate." It is therefore appropriate that William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan have entitled their illuminating collection of essays on the Agrarians *A Band of Prophets*.

The occasion for this collection was a 1980 conference at Vanderbilt University commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Itself a symposium of twelve Southerners (the most famous of whom were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, and John Gould Fletcher), *I'll Take My Stand* argued that the South must shun the siren allure of industrialism if it were to maintain its traditional culture. Art, religion, and a sense of community could be nurtured only in a society where men lived close to the soil. Combining a primitive love of nature with an aristocratic disdain for commerce, the Agrarians were ridiculed—or simply ignored—by self-respecting progressives on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Subtitled *The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*, *A Band of Prophets* attempts to assess the continuing relevance of the Agrarian vision to American society. The consensus on that issue seems to be that *I'll Take My Stand* should be read more as a metaphorical celebration of a way of life than as a literal political agenda. And yet, as Shelley observed, "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." In a society plagued by industrial pollution, nuclear brinksmanship, and Sun Belt homogeneity, one is apt to regard the Agrarians' distrust of technology as prophetic in the colloquial as well as the biblical sense.

As the hayseed antiquarianism of the thirties has become the ecological avantegardism of the seventies and eighties, the Agrarians would seem to have been vindicated by time. Perhaps just as important, however, the prophets are no longer without honor in their own country. Originally an embarrassment to a Vanderbilt administration too timid even to be intelligently conservative, the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* have won a retroactive canonization similar to that which the Catholic Church conferred on Joan of Arc. Thus, it is perhaps fitting that one of the most perceptive essays in *A Band of Prophets* is George Core's discussion of the role of creative men within the academy.

The late Agrarian Allen Tate believed that as society became more cosmopolitan it developed an entirely new kind of provincialism. Unlike his forebears, modern man is trapped by limitations not of space, but of time. Cut off from past and future, he lives only for the present. Unsustained by the pieties of the dead, he has nothing to give the unborn. Paradoxically, the Agrarians believed that by becoming more firmly rooted in a sense of place they could remain free of this new provincialism. For them, as for the Confederate dead in Tate's great ode, truth was "knowledge carried to the heart."

University of Southern Mississippi Mark Royden Winchell